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2004

A LIFE OF LEARNING

Peter Gay

Charles Homer Haskins
Lecture for 2004

ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 58

The Charles Homer Haskins Lecture

Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, was the first Chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies, from 1920 to 1926. He began his teaching career at the Johns Hopkins University, where he received the B.A. degree in 1887, and the Ph.D. in 1890. He later taught at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard, where he was Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History at the time of his retirement in 1931, and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. He served as president of the American Historical Association in 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America in 1926.

A great American teacher, Charles Homer Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized in honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of thirteen.

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Brief Biography

Peter Gay was born in Berlin, Germany in 1923. He emigrated to the United States in 1941. Gay received his BA from the University of Denver in Colorado in 1946, and his MA and Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1947 and 1951, respectively. He has also been recognized with honorary doctorates from several universities. From 1962 to 1969 he was Professor of History at Columbia University. He joined Yale University's History Department as Professor of Comparative and Intellectual European History in 1969, and was named Sterling Professor of History in 1984.

An author of more than twenty books, he has written extensively on the subjects of the Enlightenment, the Weimar Republic, Sigmund Freud, and bourgeois culture. Among his most recent publications are *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud: Vol. V, Pleasure Wars* (1997), *My German Question: Growing up in Nazi Berlin* (1998), and *Mozart* (1999).

Peter Gay was director of The New York Public Library's Center for Scholars and Writers from 1997 to August 2003. A prolific author, distinguished professor, and one of the world's most respected scholars, Peter Gay has put his distinctive imprint on all stages of planning the Center, which provides fellows with privacy for study and writing, an environment for social interaction, and a forum for public discussion.

Gay's work has been recognized with numerous awards, including the National Book Award in the category of History and Biography for *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation: Vol. I, The Rise of Modern Paganism,* 1967; the first Amsterdam Prize for Historical Science from The Hague, 1990; and the Gold Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1992. In addition, he was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1967–68 and in 1978–79, a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin, Germany, and an Overseas Fellow of Churchill College University from 1970 to 1971. In 1988, he was honored by The New York Public Library as a Library Lion. The following year, he was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Professor Gay held an ACLS Fellowship in 1959–60.

Introduction

On May 7, 2004, Peter Gay delivered the twenty-second Charles Homer Haskins Lecture to members and friends of the ACLS. The Haskins lecture series, established by ACLS President John William Ward in honor of the Council's first chairman, is entitled "A Life of Learning." It is difficult to suggest any life that better exemplifies learning, at its broadest, deepest, and most voracious, than does Peter Gay's.

A scholar, a biographer, a memoirist, Peter Gay's has written two indispensable volumes regarded as among the most important general interpretations of the Enlightenment produced in the twentieth century, and for which he won the National Book Award. His five-volume history of the nineteenth-century bourgeois cultural experience has been called a "huge and exhilaratingly ambitious project," a "major historical enterprise" requiring a "daring and breadth of knowledge possessed by few contemporary historians" and carried out "with inexhaustible energy and patience and an exuberance of spirit." Let us not forget his rich and balanced work on Freud and psychoanalysis. And then there are the many other books, on Voltaire, Mozart, the visual arts, style, Weimar culture, Puritan historians in colonial America—the list goes on. His recent capstone volume on the nineteenth century has been warmly received. The bibliographic essays at the ends of his books are marvels in their own right.

Professor Gay served as the first director of the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at The New York Public Library, leading it through the planning stages and presiding over its first four classes of fellows. One of those fellows fondly remembers not only the leadership but the feeling of family warmth Peter Gay brought to the center. "He set a very high standard of intellectual curiosity that energized the class, and made them feel not just honored, but happy, to be there."

It was Peter Gay who called for a social history of ideas, a call that has brought us some of some of the most significant work in European history in the last twenty years. Challenging historiographical givens, he has brought about a major rethinking of commonplaces, turning a fresh eye to texts we thought we already

knew. The "bourgeois Victorians," for example, will never be bourgeois or Victorian again—at least not in the way we once thought.

"Peter Gay," wrote an eminent scholar nominating him to be the Haskins Lecturer, "is an *homme de lettres* of rare distinction and perhaps unparalleled productivity. To me, the amazing thing about him is not the stupendous number and range of his achievements but their lasting nature. . . . Peter Gay incarnates the life of the mind. He reads everything. . . . [H]e continually amazes me—that word again—by having read so widely in so many different areas. . . . When he finds something that he wants to know about, whether or not it will inform his writing, he will not rest until he has found out about it."

ACLS was honored when Professor Gay accepted the invitation of our Executive Committee of the Delegates to deliver the 2004 Charles Homer Haskins Lecture. That honor is renewed with this publication, which I am sure will find readers far into the future.

—Pauline Yu, President
American Council of Learned Societies

A Life of Learning

by

Peter Gay

I have been a refugee twice in my life. The first time, far more portentous than the second, began in late April 1939 when my parents and I managed to get out of Nazi Germany. We almost didn't. If this escape to freedom had not materialized, I should really not be here talking to you, asking you to listen to me as I talk about my life in learning.

The second time came in the winter of 1955-56 at Columbia University, where I had been teaching after beginning graduate school about eight years earlier. In that year, I shifted from the Department of Public Law and Government, as it was then called, to the Department of History. This move was literally less vital to me than the first, of course, but it's largely the second exile, if that's the right word, I'll be talking about today, keeping in the background that earlier migration.

My original appointment had begun in Public Law and Government in 1947, when I was starting on my Ph.D., taking a course and teaching at the same time. I was learning on the job about American government, which is one way of remembering many interesting things. Five years after that, in 1952, I published my first book, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, a revised dissertation—revised, and, of course, enlarged. (This was before the crisis of publishing

kept editors saying, "Cut it down, cut it down.") The book received a prize at Columbia University Press; it was well received by the reviewers, as well. I discovered only much later that one of the anonymous critics (which *The Times Literary Supplement* in those years still had) gave it the front page, none other than R.H. Tawney. Despite all of this, the elders in my department, not easily disposed to promote any among the cadre of younger men (and we were all men at the time), in their wisdom chose to promote only one of us, and I was not their choice.

Then, my friends in History, finding an open spot for a Modern Europeanist, invited me to join them. My most influential spokesmen were, as I worked out later, two members of the History Department, men whom I'd come to know and love during the previous six years, Richard Hofstadter and Henry Roberts. I must say that I've always been very fortunate in my friends. The welcoming Americans whom I met in Denver in 1941, 1942, and 1943 included a rather improbable person who was one of my great teachers, only a bit older than I: a Methodist minister named Harvey Potthoff, who brought me into a group of like-minded students mainly at the University of Denver, where I finally landed in 1943, and introduced us all to the late Beethoven Quartets.

The friends I made at Columbia were from the outset historians, not surprisingly. I was still a bachelor in those days, and I became particularly close to Dick Hofstadter, spending summers with him and his family, and watching his writings, notably *The Age of Reform*, grow from lectures into books. Dick was an impressive stylist, the most impressive I've ever known in my profession, and he was particularly gifted in the witty remark—witty but pointed, a quality that is not easily transmitted to those who are blind to such graces—and also in the use of technical ideas drawn from sociology and, even more radical, from psychoanalysis, without falling into pedantry or jargon. I had already learned a good deal from him and other historians before I joined the department. I might say in passing, by the way, that those were the "bad old days": that is to

say, the mid-fifties, when jobs did not have to be advertised and there was no requirement for countrywide, or perhaps worldwide, competition. In any event, I got the history position, and have been a historian ever since. I was happy in this profession from the outset, and it took me little time to recognize that with my switch, I had come home.

It so happened that during the fateful year 1955-56, I was at Princeton, holding the Hodder Fellowship, a grant that imposed no duties on me whatsoever except to give one talk to tell people what I had done that year. Intellectually, I had moved from German social democracy to the Enlightenment. I had a plan, never realized, to write a trio of volumes on the political theory of so-called "minor" political thinkers, meaning not Locke or Rousseau, but writers like Kant and Voltaire and Lessing and Hume. They were "minor" only in the sense that they were not full-time political theorists, of course. Two years earlier, in 1953, I had published an article on the political thought of the philosophes and argued, as I must admit, on a fairly limited empirical basis, that the generally accepted view of the Enlightenment's politics was one-sided, tendentious, in short, wholly inadequate. I maintained that, by and large, the philosophes were not clueless optimists, blinded by a naïve theory of progress. They were not rationalists, if by that word one means the indisputable governance of reason and the blind neglect of the emotions. And contrary to their reputation, they did make a significant contribution to the writing of history by secularizing it. In retrospect, I wonder at my nerve, but once I became engaged in the ideas of the Enlightenment, I found, to my pleasure, that the contentions of my rather self-assertive article were being borne out by the piles of primary texts that I had now assigned to myself.

During my Princeton year, I had started, more or less accidentally, with Voltaire, but I did not then recognize that Voltaire's politics would require a full-sized treatise to explicate. The book I published in 1959 bore the simple but confident title, *Voltaire's*

Politics: The Poet as Realist. I must say I am fond of all my printed offspring, but I do have a special affection for this monograph, since it revised, or tried to revise, current notions about Voltaire the thinker, and it acclimated me to the historical method in the most direct possible way: by plunging into it.

Once my transfer to Columbia was complete, my personal agenda grew rather more inclusive than the political texts of Voltaire. The Princeton History Department boasted some distinguished members, most notably R.R. Palmer, already a widely respected Europeanist in the profession, then at work on the second edition of his famous textbook in European history. I grew rather close to him. We later overlapped, I have to add, at Yale, where I moved from Columbia in 1969, but we saw less and less of each other. After all, he could not bring himself to appreciate what he thought was the eccentric Freudianism that I preached and practiced. But returning to 1955-56, in many respects, except for Freud, Palmer was so untraditional that he did not mind talking shop at lunch. In those days, their specialty was a topic that good Princetonians rejected as undignified. So I spent many an informal meal importuning him, and saying, "Bob, tell me about history." I had a great deal to catch up with, and Bob Palmer was only too pleased to initiate me into the mysteries of eighteenth-century Europe.

In the later part of that winter of my apprenticeship, he did me a favor greater than he or I could have imagined. The New-York Historical Society, which held annual conferences, had decided that in 1956, it should devote a day or two to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the most celebrated book an American professional historian had yet written on Enlightenment Europe. I mean, of course, Carl Becker's influential *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, constantly reprinted since 1932, available now in its twelfth or thirteenth printing. It was terse, witty, with many brilliant passages and an apparently powerful thesis. In our meetings, Palmer and I had not shortchanged my interest in the Enlighten-

ment, and I had mentioned in passing my dissatisfaction with Becker's set of lectures on the philosophes' heavenly city. It seemed to me cavalier as a text, slipshod, full of mistakes, and I judged its thesis hopelessly wrong. By arguing that the philosophes' rationalism was identical with scholastic rationalism, Becker had asserted that the Enlightenment was really an unwitting and unoriginal copy of the age of Thomas Aquinas. I thought that this, to put it bluntly, was sheer nonsense. My uncompromising critique interested Palmer. He, like most other American Europeanists, had either studied with Becker or come under his sway. This fact of scholarly life, and Becker's sheer attractiveness as a man and a stylist, meant that organizers of the conference could not find anybody who was at all skeptical of Becker's slender and clever presentation. So they consulted Bob Palmer, and he gave them my name.

That spring, I went to Ithaca and gave my paper during the morning session. It's not too much to say, in all honesty, that it proved a sensation. The lunch speaker attacked it; the givers of the afternoon papers attacked it for three or four hours; and the dinner speaker attacked it as well. Now, I suppose you can imagine my bewilderment. The critics of my critique were senior people, for the most part, with considerable professional reputations. I was, after all, nothing but a beginning historian. I must say that this concentrated and prolonged assault made me sweat a bit. Still, by the evening, the frequency, vehemence, and unanimity of the comments to which I was exposed gave me confidence. All that disparagement of my heresy and all that expenditure of energy could only mean that I had really been right along. As a result, I came away from Ithaca with an unearned quantum of self-confidence, which would serve me well as I launched into my new career.

For almost two decades, I concentrated on the Enlightenment. After my *Voltaire's Politics* came out, I determined that I had not said everything that I, as an historian of eighteenth-century ideas, had to say. I projected instead a book-length essay, adding up to perhaps 100 pages, unencumbered by footnotes or bibliographies

so that I could complete the revisionist arguments I had launched in all earnestness in my study of Voltaire. But once I began writing that essay, some mysterious secret motives of its own left me so much open space, so much need for more work that it took me a decade before I could tear myself away. But there was in my thinking another intellectual stream that worked in tandem with my rethinking of the so-called Age of Reason: that is, psychoanalysis.

My interest in Freud had been launched around 1950, when I discovered that an older colleague, Franz Neumann, a refugee from Nazi Germany, was reading psychoanalysis intensively in a mini-seminar of three, which also included his wife Inge and their closest friend, one of the most amusing people I have ever known, Herbert Marcuse, who had come up from Washington to give occasional courses in sociology and then meet his friends to read and talk Freud. I knew, of course, that his fellow radicals agreed that Freud was someone worth reading. After all, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the bad boys of intellectual Marxism, had done so. And I knew that they and their slightly younger friend Neumann had long given space to what we might call a radical psychoanalysis in their critique of modern capitalism. But this preoccupation with Freud now exhibited at Neumann's house in Riverdale was something new, and it followed for me that if Franz Neumann was really studying Freud in a serious way, there must be something significant about that man's ideas, and I would do well to look into them.

At first, I have to admit, these ideas of Freud meant for me Erich Fromm. Fromm's smoothly-written essays on the social implications and applications of Freud's thought struck me at the time as persuasive, and I developed plans for a book on love and politics—another book I never wrote. (Nor can I even remember what I was trying to prove.) But then Herbert Marcuse wrote an important, devastating review of Fromm's work to show that he was a liberal in a revolutionary's clothes. He was not a tough-minded commentator, but a tender-minded one posing as somebody much more radical than he really was. Fromm's essential ideal was that human nature

is exceedingly flexible: install democratic socialism and people will change dramatically for the better. The unattractive features characteristic of modern men and women under capitalism would wilt under the institutional reforms that Fromm envisioned: greed, selfishness, philistinism came with the capitalist territory, and they would disappear along with capitalism. Marcuse, of course, had no objection to capitalism being cast off, but he insisted—and I must say, successfully for me—that Fromm's view of human nature was shallow, downright naïve. Freud had a much more hard-hitting perspective on the human animal, and Marcuse rejected any compromise on this pessimism.

From then on, I turned to Freud directly. None of the research that I undertook in my studies on the Enlightenment directly displays his authority, but in 1968 I published a small book called *Weimar Culture* that more obviously showed the master's power over me. I had a chapter in that history called "The Revolt of the Sons," followed by another chapter titled "The Revenge of the Fathers." In short, the Oedipus complex had come to the Weimar Republic. I was getting ready to take Freud very seriously and see what I could get out of him. In the course of the 1970s, I took the leap: full formal training in psychoanalysis in the Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis in New Haven. It was quite an experience: analysts as my teachers; participation in case seminars (which must be the highest form of gossip ever devised); and an orthodox attitude towards the materials—that is to say, no deviations towards Erich Fromm.

I should note that though I toyed with the notion, I never seriously considered deserting my career as a historian, not even for the pleasures of sitting silently behind a couch. As I said, I was at home in history. I hoped to write better, more inclusive, more solidly anchored history, history made and suffered by real human beings. I might also note in passing that this outlook actually helped me with the income tax. One day, in the midst of my analytic training, as I went to my analyst five days a week, I was

called in by an official of the IRS in New Haven, and asked to explain the large deductions I was taking for my psychoanalytic hours. It turned out that my perfectly honest claims that I wanted to learn about psychoanalysis to improve my performance as a historian rather than switching professions was the right attitude to take under the regulations of the Internal Revenue Service. In a word (and you may keep that in mind), the costs of refining your skills in your own profession are deductible.

I should add, by the way, that my psychoanalytic training yielded yet another unexpected dividend. Early in 1985, Don Lamb, then head of W.W. Norton, asked me to write a biography of Freud. This struck me as a fine idea, in part because I'd done a lot of reading, and very intensive reading, for many years. There were then two large-scale biographies of Freud: Ernest Jones's classic and massive three volumes, published from 1953 to 1957, and Ronald W. Clark's substantial life, published in 1980. I appreciated them both, I must say, but I was confident that there was much more to tell and much more to find out. I began my researches in Vienna, London, New York, and, above all, here in Washington, in the rich deposits at the Library of Congress. The book was completed in two years, and if it went so fast, it did so because I'd already done a lot of homework on what Freud had done that made him worth writing a biography about.

Still, the question remained: Was this late schooling of any use to me? I must report that the reception of my work was somewhat skittish: interesting topics, maybe, a new view of the past, too, and on the whole, well written. The lessons and style I had learned at Columbia were not wasted, but the psychoanalysis? A broad array of objections has been thrown at me through the years: psychoanalysis has been discredited; psychoanalysis works, but only for the Viennese bourgeois of the nineteenth century; or, psychoanalysis doesn't make any difference to the kind of subjects that we historians are interested in, because it deals so strictly with individuals only. In self defense, I published in 1985 a small book titled *Freud for*

Historians, designed to dispose of these and other cavils. I still think well of the book and consider my defenses of Freud well taken, but I cannot see any evidence that it has left the slightest mark on my profession.

Further to underscore the insecurity of my intellectual position, I've long been under assault from psychohistorians, as well. According to their appraisals of my approach, I accord far too much causal importance to social and cultural pressures. As they see it, historical actors are, as it were, slaves of their unconscious. No wonder my profession has been inhospitable to my explanations. Indeed, precisely because I am a historian, I was and am allergic to single-minded, single-cause explanations, and I do not believe that Freud was disposed to give such explanations. In any event, after some of these criticisms began to appear, I was lucky enough to read David Hume's brief autobiography, and I noted that he had taken comfort from being attacked by all sides for his history of England. Whigs and Tories alike found severe fault with his historical writings. He presumed that he must be getting something right given that he was so universally attacked, and so, for a second time in my career (my sweaty day at Ithaca, of course, was the first), I managed to take negative responses as a source for self-confidence.

As I proceeded with my work, I found good use for this self-assurance, as I increasingly resorted to psychoanalytic categories to understand the past. In 1976, I published a series of lectures on historical causation, delivered at Cooper Union in New York, titled *Art and Act*, with chapters on Edouard Manet, Walter Gropius, and Piet Mondrian, in which I proposed that the historian is bound to discover causes happening among individuals or groups or nations or armies because these causes come from three domains in life, all of which the historian must pay attention to: culture, craft, and character. These sources are perfectly obvious, and I need not explain them. An individual is born into a culture with rewards and punishments meted out, for the most part, in accordance with the approval of the kind of culture that parents are likely to submit to.

At the same time, the individual enters the world with certain native talents, nearly all of them latent and gradually unfolding, or being distorted under the influence of parents, siblings, teachers, friends, priests. Craft has the most visible impact on people engaged in the higher reaches of culture—poets, painters, architects, composers—because as apprentices, they enlist in a distinct, dominant style that will take much patience to acquire and much independence of spirit, energy, and talent to defy. In short, I maintained, and with *Art and Act*, tried to show, that historical conditions and events, large and small, shaped in the confluence and conflicts of individual character, professional training, and the way of the world, make for events. The world supplies the individual with material.

I want to dwell on this three-fold scheme for a moment, since I take some pride in it, and since it is at this very point that my work has evoked the most prominent and persistent controversies. By itself, each of the three causal agents that I have mentioned can provide only part of a comprehensive explanation. In fact, even the three together do not fully do the work by themselves. Much depends on social realities and on the fantasies that individuals bring to them. The historian wants to know—and I am, of course, here quoting Ranke's famous observation—how the past had actually been, but beyond that, and beyond Ranke, how the past had been received. This is where a special burden must fall on the historian's interpretation of the individual. The history of perception or of unconsciously received ideas is important, as is the solution of historical conundrums as to the reality of the world, with all its dangers of misunderstanding.

This is to say that, in my view, psychological issues will appear twice in the historian's research: first, in the shape in which historical actors work through the stimuli that external reality provides—that is the domain of character; and secondly, in tracking down the collective range of possibilities available to the culture within which these historical actors operate. The two are by no

means always identical. For the psychohistorian, of course, these investigations are decisive and the rest of the historian's work is mere shadow play. But the historian who, like me, finds it necessary to add the social and craft dimensions seeks a broader and more complex grasp of the whole. In this age of sloganeering, it is perhaps unfortunate that I never came up with a seductive name for the kind of history I have been writing for decades. I have called it, a little awkwardly, history informed by psychoanalysis. That name, to repeat my fundamental message, says two things: First, the historical reductionism of psychohistorians, however interesting and even important it can be, cannot by its nature unmask the past in all its dimensions. And historians who show an interest in the unconscious domains of taste, erotic passion and decision-making, and the traces that they leave on conscious life, are likely to come close to the essential forces that clearly belong into general interpretation.

I want to add that history, so informed, can be most revealing, not merely in light of the answers it supplies, but by means of the questions it raises. It can also supply order to a still-inchoate project. In the early 1980s, when I turned to the Victorian bourgeoisie (a topic I shall revisit later), it became clear to me that I would not select conventional themes to explicate that much-maligned element in the nineteenth-century urban population. The first two volumes covered love and sexuality, and the third one dealt with aggression—a by then unconventional arrangement that came naturally to me. I have long been aware of the difficulties raised by such a perspective on the past. The historian whose work is informed by psychoanalysis is likely to find important material that is not suited to the kind of interpretation crucial to a deep understanding.

Carl Becker once said that historic figures do not deliberately produce documents for posterity—unless, of course, like Henry Kissinger, they want to leave a record of their achievements at variance with what the diligent research of others might provide. Most of the documents we depend on may be accidents, in part,

though even they lie open to the curiosity of the psychoanalytically-informed historian.

To return to my chronological sequence. My *Weimar Culture* was published the year before the second volume of my Enlightenment came out. *Weimar Culture* started as a commission from Bernard Bailyn and Donald Fleming at Harvard, who were editing a volume concerning refugees from Hitler's regime: their effects on their new home, and the effects of their new home on them. Bailyn and Fleming wanted a long introductory essay about the experiment in democratic republicanism, then unique in German history. This commission was a sign—not so much *from* me, but *to* me—that I could replace my passion for eighteenth-century intellectual history, though the field had fascinated me for two decades. It was also a sign that psychoanalysis was taking a more prominent role in my thinking. Since then, I have addressed other puzzles that intrigue me: the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, Freud, historiography. For more than two years now, I have been following a still-different trail and one harder than anything I have tried to do: modernism, with a comprehensive study that I am very far from completing. I hope to put Virginia Woolf, Orson Welles, George Ballanchine, and Pablo Picasso, among others, between two covers, and that kind of madness takes time.

This diversity—some have called it flightiness—brings up the question of the historian's motives. Why do historians choose a certain topic to work on? It may be because their advisor recommended it, or because their advisor loathed it. It may be a more or less accidental encounter. I have known historians who were so taken by a lovely town in Italy that it fostered the desire to do research while spending a while in paradise. The choice of a topic may also represent the need to come to terms with a particularly traumatic set of events that the historian or his family has gone through. That holds particularly true of much historical work on Nazi Germany. Experience, in short, is a potent incentive.

Now, do these repeated changes of focus have a particular meaning for me? Some friends who are interested in my work have wondered about that, and professed to find a common thread in my diverse publications, perhaps the need to find the triumph of reason in view of my witnessing the triumph of unreason in the Nazi period. It is, I think, an appealing idea: the quest for reason as my secret central attitude. But I cannot find that thread, persuasive though this amateur psychoanalysis might appear. Of course, I may be wrong. Among the wise things that Freud has taught us is that we do not really know ourselves very well.

Nevertheless, if there *is* a thread running through my work, I think it is a different one. Leave aside my first book about a democratic socialist, carrying overtones of my political sympathies at the time; and leave aside, too, the commissioned essays like the one on the Weimar Republic. In terms of the rest of my work, the single quality that gives my writing a certain coherence, I think, is a passion for getting things straight. In short, it is revisionist—though not, I hope, revisionist for its own sake. I do not pretend to resemble Hamlet who, as we know, cursed the duty of setting things right. Quite the contrary. The need to fill in empty spaces on the map of historical scholarship or to correct what I deem significant misreadings of the past has always been interesting, tempting, and highly enjoyable to me. Furthermore, as a historian, I have always found it necessary to be concrete. Let me give you here two brief instances of this revisionist impulse in my writing: the Enlightenment, which occupied me through the fifties and sixties, and the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, which I started on in the early seventies.

My studies in eighteenth-century intellectual history arose from a need to inform myself. I was then teaching a year-long course at Columbia College on the history of political ideas, one of those "from Plato to NATO" courses. Each year that I repeated this undergraduate offering, I took the opportunity to acquaint myself more closely with some of the past: a movement or century that I

should really know better than I did. This was one reason that brought me to the eighteenth century. I found the secondary material thin and largely unconvincing. In those years, French students of the eighteenth century tended to leave the work of understanding the world to linguistic specialists, philosophers, or professors of French literature. There were enormously detailed and useful biographies of most of the chief actors: Diderot, Rousseau, d'Holbach, and the others. But there were few comprehensive titles that sought to place the *siècle des lumières* in the kind of historical context I was looking for. In English, of course, the coverage was all the more skimpy, and the most popular and widely available study was, as I have mentioned, Carl Becker's *Heavenly City.*

It seemed to me, then, that there was an immense amount of work left to be done: in particular, a close reading of the philosophes. This I proceeded to do and, again, the first product of my work was a study of Voltaire's politics. In point of fact, there already existed a book on that very subject: a revised dissertation from Columbia's French Department, which, by its nature, underscored the opportunity—shall I say, the desperate need—for a historian like myself to go over the very same material this particular scholar had used and to expand my reading beyond hers. The author had innocently taken Voltaire's irony literally and had wholly overlooked the political implications of his poetry and drama. Thus, his epic poem *La Henriade* played no role in her dissertation. Voltaire in writing this long poem wished to rival Virgil, this was clear, but there was much more to be said than this. With its adulation of an effective and tolerant French monarch, Henri IV, *La Henriade* was a straightforward partisan political job. It was part of the political battles of Voltaire's time. *La Henriade* took the side of what was called the Royalist party, and thus fitted perfectly into Voltaire's distaste for the party of the nobility, which saw the aristocracy as the guardian of historic French liberties: that is to say, liberties for the aristocracy.

Furthermore, Voltaire's partisan meddling in Genevan politics during the 1760s, both interesting and revealing, was invisible in the dissertation I am describing, because the author had no knowledge of the embittered controversies that divided Genevans during those years. This was a particularly fascinating instance of Voltaire the empiricist: the result of learning from experience, as local politics showed a marked evolution in his thinking. From the lordly intellectual aristocrat who did not want his servants to hear his blasphemies, Voltaire developed into a defender of ordinary Genevans, agitating for their right to the vote because he learned that they read books; in fact, that they even read *his* books. When it came to Geneva's political infighting, in brief, Voltaire became very clearly someone to the left of Rousseau himself.

My recent writing on the Victorian bourgeoisie is somewhat different but essentially related in origins. The five volumes I published between 1984 and 1998 under the collective title *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* turned out to be a general defense of the nineteenth-century middle class, but they did not start out that way. Around 1970, in drafting some chapters on the late nineteenth century for a textbook that I was writing with my friend Bob Webb, I became intrigued by the cultural history of the period. It was a time of dramatic changes in painting, literature, architecture, poetry, drama; and at the same time, there was a complex response to industrialization and the democratization of politics.

I have already decided that I said farewell to the Enlightenment, having said what I had to say, and the century that followed seemed a fine place to start again. I recognized the risks of entering a new field on which others had written—and were writing—so copiously and so well, but shifting gears had not stopped me before and would not do so then. The opening wedge into the century proved to be the bourgeoisie. You must recall here the scholarly situation some thirty years ago, when I launched my *Bourgeois Experience.* Social history had been in the ascendant ever since the end of World War II.

Women, blacks, workers, revolutionaries: these had become the favorite subjects for historians. I am not denying that much good work was done in these fields. To expand the agenda of what historians are properly entitled to deal with was an extremely valuable activity. I do not intend to criticize social history; some of my best friends are social historians. If much of their work was politically motivated, if some of it proved tendentious, that, I thought, was a price worth paying. But one consequence of the new, triumphant social history was the relative neglect of that vast intermediate class, the bourgeoisie. I say relative because, of course, work on the middle classes did not cease. It simply moved away from the center of scholarly activity as historians discovered materials that no one had used before, offering interpretations that upset the traditional consensus. It was an exhilarating pair of decades, and for the history of the middle class it meant slim pickings. And so it seemed like an ideal time to enrich our understanding of a class that had been so prominent a player in the politics of Victorian times.

Contrary to common perception, I did not start with a defense of the bourgeoisie. Improbable as it may sound, I merely wanted to find out more about it. How and where to begin, that was the next question. I knew from the outset it was pointless to start within the conventional framework, and, as I have noted, the psychoanalytic theory on the drives made my choice of topics almost inescapable. At this point, a coincidence helped me along the way. My reading in psychoanalysis directed me towards the sexual drive. This was a direct fruit of my analytic education. Its close companion and adversary, aggression, would come next. That was as far as I could go in 1970-71. The coincidence to which I refer is that my wife, Ruth, who was then working as an archivist at Yale University Library's Manuscripts and Archives Department, came home one day after work with a photocopy of a page of a mid-nineteenth century diary. "This," she said, "may interest you." It certainly did. It was the opening page of a retrospective journal compiled by Mabel Loomis Todd, written just after her daughter was born and beginning with the moment when her husband had impregnated

her. Here was sexual detail of a kind and with a specificity that one would consider unthinkable for respectable Victorian women to write down, even to remember, and that one would find mainly, if at all, in pornography.

This discovery started it all. It firmly settled the arrangement of my study of the Victorian middle class. The very next morning, as you may imagine, I tried to find out as much about Mabel Todd as I could, and there was plenty of material in the division from which this one page had come. Mabel Todd was a gold mine: well-educated, well-spoken, she had been living at Amherst with her husband, the astronomer David Todd, and she had many more entries of the kind that my wife had discovered for me—from journals, diaries, letters—largely corroborated by her husband's private journals. To make it more intriguing still, Mabel Todd took a lover named Austin Dickinson, Emily Dickinson's brother. She had been written about before, I noticed, but it was also usually—in fact, always, I must say—with barely disguised prissiness. Her love life remained to be explored. And so did that of others. Those reticent Victorians let themselves go with remarkable candor in their private writings, their letters to their spouses or sisters, or in their diaries. I consulted numerous archives, not just at Yale, not just in the United States, and other documents, including, for example, surveys by physicians like the famous Mosher survey of the 1890s, which near the very end of the nineteenth century interviewed more than forty women, married all and college graduates, about their sexual experiences and feelings. And it turned out that married women, all of the respectable classes, often enjoyed their experience in bed, nearly always with their husbands. One other historian I must mention here, Carl Degler of Stanford, was doing very similar work, hence we both came to the same conclusion, which may be summarized as saying, the Victorians were not Victorians.

These rather astonishing results required a close look at the publications on the subject, and there I found an interesting

sequence of phases: total silence early on, with hints about salacious men and women; then after the second World War, the same, but in far more explicit language. Marys and Magdalenes, saints and sinners, and their transgressions were openly discussed, as though they were really comical and worthy entertainment. So there was a great deal of enjoyment on the part of writers, but what was still needed, of course, was a good look at ordinary people living ordinary lives. The result, as they say, is history, and I insist that the result came to be what it was because it was a historian who had done the work.

I hold that there is something about the professional practice of history that serves to inoculate its practitioners for bypassing such unproductive fancies as post-modernism. Not that professional history writing is immune from fads of its own. Through the decades, a certain conservatism has indeed resisted useful, even necessary, innovations. I can testify to one of them: the insights of Freud. But the history of history shows at the same time a creditable willingness to borrow what it is necessary to borrow, and to go where it must go. Ever since what I have called the secularization of historical causes by the great Enlightenment historians came to pass, the historical domain has refined its quest for evidence, expanded its depth of interpretations, and—especially among the cultural historians, of whom I am one—greatly enlarged the range of subject matter. I have found it not just a privilege, but sheer pleasure to have entered the world of Voltaire, of Jacob Burckhardt, of Marc Bloch, of Van Woodward, and Dick Hofstadter.

It is on this personal note that I want to end. I have at times been accused of being a workaholic. I must plead guilty to the charge that it is undisturbed working time that makes me happy. The traditional division between work and play does not really fully apply to me. Of course, the work I am now doing and will be doing for some time will compel me, poor thing, to look at Manets, listen to Stravinsky, walk through buildings by Gropius, read and re-read Proust and Virginia Woolf. "Is this work?" I have sometimes asked

myself, after a good morning at the laptop. In his autobiography, Goethe famously warned his readers that what one wishes for in youth, one might get in adult life. This has not been a problem for me. As long as I can remember, I hoped to spend a lifetime in learning, and I am grateful that my fate has given me precisely that.

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